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Habitat management for

Furbearers



In Kansas

Trapping and the fur trade had a profound impact on the early exploration and settlement of Kansas. Trappers and people who traded with Indians to obtain furs learned about the country and helped establish travel routes. As time passed, farmers, ranchers, and businessmen replaced the trappers, traders, and Indians. Cities were built where fur trading posts had been and roads were constructed over the trails established by these frontiersmen.

During the late 1800's furbearer habitat shrank and some species disappeared. Numbers of furbearers declined due to years of over exploitation and lack of regulated harvest. Recoveries in furbearer populations have occurred since the early 1900's. Harvestable surpluses of furbearers are now a product of the land similar to crops and livestock. Much of the fur harvested today in Kansas is taken by rural residents of the state that participate in part-time trapping and hunting activities during the winter months. Many farmers and ranchers are able to earn a little extra money from the sale of pelts while they enjoy the traditional sports of hunting and trapping.

The number of people purchasing licenses to take fur animals has fluctuated widely in the past 50 years. When fur prices are high, more licenses are sold. The price of pelts for different species also varies from year to year according to the buyer needs and the public's preference. With a little extra effort, the land can be managed to provide higher yields of furbearers.

Furbearers are very interesting to observe. You usually don't get to see them very long, but a coyote leisurely trotting out across the prairie or a mother raccoon with her little ones tagging along are sights not easily forgotten. Photographers sit quietly for hours to click their shutter at such a subject and artists strive to capture the true essence of furbearers on canvas.

The common furbearers of Kansas can be separated into three major groups according to their use and need for water.

Semi-aquatic furbearers - These furbearers must have permanent surface water areas of sufficient quantity and size to provide their life requirements of food, water, and shelter. The two species in this group are the muskrat and beaver. Both of these species build dome-shaped houses or lodges out of sticks, limbs, or aquatic vegetation or use bank dens with

underwater entrances. Both species are primarily vegetarians. Beaver prefer the inner bark from woody plants, while muskrats use herbaceous aquatic plants including the roots.

Water-associated furbearers - These animals prefer to live near water, but they are capable of surviving in areas with only small amounts of water. The species in this group are raccoon and mink. The raccoon is omnivorous, which means it eats both plants and animals. Raccoons usually consume more plant than animal material. Their diets vary from one season to another, as well as geographically over the state. Raccoons prefer dens in trees but will also use hollow logs, the ground dens of other animals, and rocky crevices. The mink's diet is also subject to seasonal changes and geographical location. They are highly carnivorous, which means they eat meat, and they rarely eat vegetable matter. Mink usually select river bank dens abandoned by beaver or muskrat but sometimes choose cavities in trees or logs.

Upland furbearers - These animals require some water for drinking, but they do not necessarily associate themselves closely with water areas. This group includes fox, coyote, bobcat, badger, weasel, skunk, and opossum. This group is predominantly meat eaters. The fox, coyote, skunk, and opossum also consume items such as fruits, berries, greens, and buds. Members of this group use dens in trees, logs, rock crevices, and holes in the ground. Occasionally some of these furbearers use farm buildings, storm sewers, and brush piles for dens.

Habitat Needs

Direct habitat management for furbearers has seldom been effectively demonstrated. Most examples of habitat modification are directed towards population suppression or problems rather than enhancement. Furbearers are generally considered secondarily or as a by-product of habitat management for other wildlife species.

The size of the home range or the area in which the animals live throughout the year varies greatly among furbearers. The home range of the coyote, bobcat, and fox is usually large and often covers several square miles. It is therefore hard to manage for these three species. The other eight species of furbearers have smaller ranges in which management on a smaller scale, such as an individual farm, can show benefits. Of these eight species the muskrat has the smallest range which may be as little as one acre of marsh or pond.

Foxes, coyotes, and other predators have in the past been cast in the role of villains. Some predatory furbearers may get in the habit of killing livestock or poultry, but there are usually just a few individuals that are responsible. There is no reason to kill an entire population within an area to stop a few individuals. The solution is to remove the problem animals.

Water

A dependable water supply may be provided by streams, ponds, wetlands, springs, or wells.

The semi-aquatic species (beaver and muskrat) must have permanent water. They live in water and depend on aquatic and riparian vegetation for food and for building their homes or dams. The water-associated species (raccoons and mink) must have permanent water even though they don't live in it, since much of their food lives in or near water. Upland furbearers need a dependable source of drinking water. They also use water areas for hunting. Riparian vegetation, which includes the trees, shrubs, vines, and their debris found along streams is used by many furbearers for dens and cover. The logs, limbs, leaves, and other debris also harbor many small animals used for food.

Food

Furbearers eat both animals and plants but most of them, with the exception of muskrats, opossum, and beavers, prefer animal matter. Depending on their skill as predators, they eat everything from rabbits and squirrels to mice, birds, bird eggs, and insects. Mink and raccoon frequently utilize prey such as frogs, fish, clams, turtles, and crayfish.

A broad array of vegetative materials is also consumed by these furbearers. Many of these plant materials are eaten when they are in season or when animal matter is in short supply. Plant materials used for food range from fruits, berries, and nuts to leaves, green shoots, tubers, bulbs, roots, stems, buds, and twigs. Beaver cut, eat, and store twigs, limbs, and small trees. They strip the bark off of these woody parts and eat the inner bark and the twigs. Several field crops including corn and milo are also relished food items.

Muskrats and beaver prefer the roots, bulbs, stems, leaves, and limbs of aquatic plants and riparian trees. The opossum will eat nearly anything available including frogs, tadpoles, bird eggs, insects, small mammals, carrion, fruits, and berries.

Cover

Wooded stream banks and adjoining woodlands are very important to furbearers. Trees, shrubs, and vines provide food, shelter, and concealment cover for animals to travel along these corridors. Woodlands should be diverse which means they should contain many species of trees and shrubs. Like many wildlife species, furbearers prefer the "edge" between woodland and cropland or between woodland and rangeland. These areas should contain plants of different age groups from saplings to mature den trees. Hollow logs, den trees, and brush piles are often used to raise a family and for shelter during inclement weather.

Habitat Management Suggestions

Properly managed woodlands along streams are very important to furbearers. All furbearers use these wooded areas as travel lanes and for cover and food. Habitat management for furbearers in Kansas is not common and most benefits are derived from management for other species.

The following are some things that should be done for furbearer management.

1. Woodland preservation and enhancement - Woody draws and wooded areas along streams should be preserved and, in many instances, improved by planting additional native species such as oak, walnut, hackberry, ash, and mulberry. Management for furbearers and other wildlife should be a dual purpose of woodlands as well as management for lumber, firewood, and nut production. Trees may also provide windbreak protection and beautification.
2. Woodland harvest - Selective tree harvest and management with wildlife as an objective, will benefit furbearers as well as future tree yields. Leave den trees and manage for the maximum number of plant species.
3. Fencing - Wooded areas should be fenced to limit livestock use. Livestock grazing in woodlands is seldom beneficial to furbearers or any wildlife.
4. Burning - Woodlands should not be burned in Kansas. Burning, as a general rule, will not benefit the woodland or the wildlife using it.
5. Retain den trees, hollow logs, and brush piles - Den trees, hollow logs, and brush piles provide permanent and temporary cover and homes for furbearers and other wildlife species. Two to four dens per acre should be a goal in woodlands managed for wildlife.
6. Rangeland management - Good range management and specialized grazing systems can benefit wildlife habitat.
7. Cropland residue management and minimum tillage - Good cropland residue management, including minimum tillage or leaving as much crop residue on the soil surface as possible, is a good wildlife management practice. Crop residues provide food and cover for rabbits and other prey species. Fall harvested crops should not be tilled until the following spring. If tillage is necessary, undercutting implements should be used to keep as much crop stubble and waste grain on the surface as possible.
8. Permanent water - Permanent water is a necessity for the semi-aquatic and water-associated species. Upland furbearers require permanent water within their territories for drinking and procuring food. Wetlands should be maintained and the construction of new ponds and marshes should be considered. Efforts should be directed towards furnishing clean, good quality water.
9. Rules and Regulations - All game laws, rules, and regulations for taking furbearers should be followed. A current license should be carried at all times. Good ethics are an essential behavior of all trappers, hunters, and wildlife observers.

The Soil Conservation Service, local conservation districts, Kansas Fish and Game Commission, and Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service offer guidance on soil, water, plants, and wildlife habitat management.



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